BOOK REVIEW

Cities, Disaster Risk and Adaptation

C. Wamsler

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In *Cities, disaster risk and adaptation*, Christine Wamsler’s significant contribution to the area of environmental risk and adaptation coalesces, drawing the strands of planning, architecture and socio-economic conditions together to form an intricate web. It begins with the idea that disaster and its inherent risk to our ways of life is increasing exponentially, outlines the reasons why, and the impacts where it has already occurred. Importantly, it predicts what will occur if we fail to adapt to certain risks. In this book, Wamsler debunks the idea that urban centres, even those in first world countries, are places of refuge, immune to risk and the effects of climate change. She asserts that all cities generate hazards directly through the creation of urban heat islands and indirectly because of their contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, though it is the poor who tend to bear the brunt of disaster risk.

This work is organized into three key parts with introductory and concluding chapters. The first part contains the two theoretical chapters that underpin the book and set the scene for further discussion. Wamsler introduces important terms and concepts central to understanding urban disaster risk management, risk reduction and adaptation, contending that this field of study is still emerging with some terms and concepts undergoing formation and subject to debate. In stating this, she defines areas for future research. The idea of ‘mainstreaming’ is brought to the fore and becomes a repetitive theme woven through all the three parts. There is an important governance discussion where organizational mechanisms are considered in terms of modification and adaptation leading to improvements in urban resilience. Part One also highlights the characteristics of urban places linked to specific vulnerabilities. These coalesce in Figure 3.6 which provides a detailed causal loop detailing the relationship between climate change, disasters, and urban developments. Part Two deals with the current practice of urban planning for risk reduction and adaptation. These concepts are discussed initially in terms of high-, middle- and low-income nations. The focus of Chapter 4 is the presentation of existing mainstream measures and strategies implemented by national and local authorities to reduce risk. Specific insurance schemes are discussed which reduce risk to the most vulnerable members of society – the poor. From this structural risk reduction and adaptation, the discussion turns in Chapter 5 to the proactive strategies that city dwellers implement to reduce and adapt to the increasing numbers of and more intense disasters predicted and experienced*. Cities, disaster risk and adaptation* debunks the theory that adaptive capacity is linked to income levels alone. Higher education levels also play a significant part in enabling urban citizens to understand the problem and adapt practices to reduce their impact on climate change and thus indirectly on disaster. Part Three provides a comparison of the theoretical and practical approaches presented in Parts One and Two. It elaborates on the notion of resilient cities and sustainable urban transformation and how this may be achieved.

The emergent message from this part, amply reinforced through Wamsler’s practical experiences, is the need for agencies, formalized mechanisms and citizen capabilities to be linked for robust adaptive change and increased resilience.

*Cities, disaster risk and adaptation* is primarily a text book. Throughout each chapter Wamsler asks the student to consider concepts or place themselves in various situations. Each chapter ends with a ‘Test yourself or others’, a ‘Guide to further reading’ and a ‘Web resources’ section, providing the student and instructor with a range of tutorial activities and links that will enhance students’ understanding. It is the student focus that makes this book different from other works in this area. In a field that is still subject to formation, *Cities, disaster risk and adaptation* provides a central resource for teaching a range of students not just what has occurred but also what must still be accomplished if risk mitigation and adaptation of the urban environment are to be successful. It will be particularly useful in the areas of geography, urban planning, urban design, risk management and development studies, sociology and environmental design.

The strengths of this book include a student focus that provides a range of practical examples on which students can draw to link theoretical knowledge to practice. It also provides a critical view of the success or otherwise of a range of existing approaches to risk mitigation and adaptation, again demonstrated by real-world examples. It links different governance systems to insurance risk and homelessness, tenure security, social security access, disaster and emergency agencies, education and income distribution, demonstrating how changes in one area impact on the overall risk profiles that adversely affect nations and their urban citizens. It debunks the myth that urban centres are self-contained islands immune to risk associated with climate change. All of this is built on a sound theoretical basis that links past practices to the present presenting a holistic approach to urban risk disaster mitigation and adaptation. For those already working in the field, *Cities, disaster risk and adaptation* provides a valuable resource for policy-makers, urban managers and planners, emergency and disaster agencies and community groups seeking best practice in urban disaster and recovery mitigation and adaptation. There is perhaps an over-reliance on figures, tables and boxes of information to tell a story, particularly in the first part and introductory chapter. For undergraduate students, this may be daunting. Occasionally, the numbering of these goes awry. In the introductory chapter, Box 1.3 does not appear at all. There are frequent references to grey, blue and green resources that are not fully explained in terms of their differences and application indicating that this is not a text for early undergraduate studies. Despite these minor quibbles, Wamsler’s work provides a sound theoretical foundation, new ideas and practical solutions to problems associated with disaster risk and adaptation in an urban environment. It explores the ways in which resilient cities can be built leading to sustainable urban transformation and is a welcome addition to this emergent field of study from a world leader in this area.

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